

Eagles Look To Finish Highland Tourney Strong With Consolation Title

by Bradley Piros, Reporter
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HIGHLAND – CM head coach Mike Arbuthnot wanted to play four games at the 37th Annual Highland Tournament.

Only eight of the 16 teams in the tournament get to do so, but CM is one of those teams.

“It’s one of the top tournaments in the state,” Arbuthnot said before it had even started. “That’s one of those tournaments where your goal is to go and play four games.”

The Eagles will be playing a fourth game, just not exactly the one they desired.

After a first-round exit to Okawville, the Eagles dropped down to the consolation bracket where they beat Belleville West 72-24 and then Triad 47-45 in the consolation semifinals Wednesday evening.

Now, CM will play Teutopolis in the consolation championship on Saturday, Jan. 20 at 10 a.m.

It wasn't smooth sailing against Triad though.

The Knights got off to a quick 5-0 lead after a basket from Erica Boyce and a three-pointer from Savannah Hildebrand. Avari Combes got CM going to come back and lead temporarily at 8-7 before Makenna Witham's three made it 10-8 Triad.

Isabelle Edwards sank two free throws to tie the game back up before Marlee Durbin drilled a three to go ahead 13-10 after the first quarter.

The teams traded three-pointers to open the second quarter before Hildebrand really caught fire. She made four triples that quarter to tie the game at 21 and then take a 24-21 lead.

Durbin answered with another three and then Combes' basket gave CM a narrow 26-24 lead at halftime.

What came next was a bizarre second half.

CM outscored Triad 16-2 in the third, but the Knights returned the favor and outscored the Eagles 19-5 in the fourth. When all was said and done, it was canceled as both teams scored 21 points in the second half.

"It was kind of a bizarre first half too," Arbuthnot said. "It was only a small lead at half-time. I thought we had a pretty good third quarter, and then in the fourth, some things just started going against us."

"We weren't real smart a couple of times defensively, we missed some layups, they started knocking down threes from 25 feet, and you know, everything in the world was going against us. But we hung in there and made enough plays at the other end to get it done," Arb continued.

"So, I'm proud of our kids, proud of our effort. We were battling a lot of things out there in that fourth quarter, but we made enough plays down the stretch."

Combes led CM with 15 points while Durbin added 11. Marley Ogden scored six and Reegan Twente had five.

Combes also had a heck of a defensive performance according to her coach.

“I can’t say enough how much Avari Combes did for about the final 70 percent of the game,” Arbuthnot said, “what she did on number 31 (Hildebrand) was hold her to one point after she was carrying them with 15.”

Hildebrand finished as Triad’s top scorer with 16 points. Witham scored 11, Boyce scored eight and Delaney Hess and Maddie Hunt each scored five.

“Obviously the third quarter we really struggled to score, but that’s a credit to ,” Triad head coach Josh Hunt said. “We missed some shots that we normally make and those things happen. In the fourth quarter, I felt like we played with a sense of urgency the entire time. We switched it up defensively a little bit which gave them fits. We gave ourselves a chance, but they made some big-time free throws down the stretch.”

Coach Hunt was happy to see his team’s improvement since a 66-29 loss to CM earlier in the season.

“The growth we’ve made since that early December date is clearly obvious,” he said. “We’re just going to continue to grow and get better and when the real season starts, I think we’ll be ready.”

Triad and CM of course being Mississippi Valley Conference rivals, it made for an interesting tournament game.

“That was more of a tournament game,” Arbuthnot said. “I think that’s how our kids took it as such.”

“You always kind of worry when you step out of your conference and you’re playing in a tournament, but then you’re playing a conference school, how the kids will look at that game. Like, OK, it doesn’t really count against our conference, but it does count against our record,” Arb said.

“It’s tough to really play teams like that in a tournament setting because the scouts are just so accurate if that makes sense,” Hunt said. “They know everything about us, we know everything about them.”

They will meet again on Friday, Jan. 26 at 7:30 p.m. in Bethalto and maybe again in the postseason.

Triad dropped to 12-11 on the season while CM improved to 21-4.

“So, that’s our 21st win of the year,” Arbuthnot said, “and I told the girls, it's one of those things where there’s going to be six or seven games out of the year where it just feels like you’re in quicksand and a lot of things aren’t going right, but you find a way and that’s what we were able to do.”

The Eagles, ranked No. 9 in Class 3A, will play T-Town for the consolation championship. CM previously beat the Lady Shoes 43-26 in Bethalto back on Jan. 8.